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SUBJECT: (C) SHAYKH SABAH'S VISIT TO WASHINGTON

REF: A. KUWAIT 3358

[B](#). KUWAIT 3316

[C](#). KUWAIT 3589

Classified By: (U) AMBASSADOR RICHARD H. JONES; REASON: 1.5 (B,D)

[1](#)1. (C) INTRODUCTION: This message is intended to assist preparations for Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah al-Ahmed al-Jaber al-Sabah's visit to Washington, where he is due to meet with President Bush on September 10. We recommend that he be invited to meet (separately) with the Secretaries of State, Defense, Treasury, and Commerce.

[1](#)2. (C) CONGRATULATIONS...: Every meeting with Shaykh Sabah should begin with congratulations on his elevation to Prime Minister in July, which strengthened his ability to run the government and explicitly enhanced his personal prestige (he is now addressed as "Highness" rather than "Excellency"; previously, only the Amir and Crown Prince merited that honorific). In his mid-seventies and fitted with a pacemaker, Shaykh Sabah is nonetheless far more energetic and mentally alert than his brother the Amir, let alone the Crown Prince. Always smiling, he speaks passable English but sometimes prefers to use an interpreter in official meetings.

[1](#)3. (C) ...AND THANKS: Shaykh Sabah will welcome sincere thanks for Kuwait's extraordinary support to Operation Iraqi Freedom. Indeed, as we have reported previously, Kuwait was the one absolutely indispensable ally, providing the main platform for the ground campaign (and a good portion of the air strikes) and giving its all to facilitate our activities: the GOK closed more than half the country's territory to civilians in order to accommodate our troop buildup, allowed us to take over a major seaport and much of the only international airport, gave us extensive use of all three of its military airbases, and contributed hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of Assistance-In-Kind, including unlimited fuel for US forces operating through or from Kuwait. Kuwait's government and people were unique in the Arab world for their forthright united support of OIF. The GOK has also been a key partner in OEF and has gone to the very limit of its resources to ensure the security of Americans in Kuwait, especially since the October 2002 terrorist attack on Failaka island in which a US Marine was killed.

[1](#)4. (C) R-E-S-P-E-C-T: The intense cooperation between Kuwait and the US in the buildup to and execution of OIF was almost bound to be followed by an anti-climax. The Kuwaitis now feel underappreciated, taken for granted. Two main reasons: disappointment that President Bush did not visit here while in the Gulf region, and unfulfilled (unrealistic) expectations of being handed lucrative contracts for Iraqi reconstruction. The most important message Shaykh Sabah will be looking for is assurance that we remain committed to the strategic partnership with Kuwait and that we value it as a more than a cash cow for funding international commitments or as a regional parking lot for military forces.

[1](#)5. (C) A STRATEGIC PARTNER: The next most important message he will be looking for is that we will stay the course in Iraq, even if the price is high in blood and treasure. The Kuwaitis know they are strategically bound to us; they want us to be seen as steadfast masters of events. This small country's most strategic value for us is its location and its willingness to place itself at our disposal in defense of regional stability and in the Global War On Terrorism. At the same time, now that Saddam's regime is gone, Kuwait hopes for a peace dividend. It will want to maintain a robust mil-mil relationship with us, but it will be less willing to spend as much in support of an enduring large US military presence. We are working to arrange a visit to Washington by Defense Minister Shaykh Jaber Mubarak in early CY 2004 to coincide with the first US-Kuwait Joint Military Commission meeting since 1999. The Defense Review Group, a joint process lasting several months starting in September, will assess Kuwait's military needs in light of the new reality in the region and help set the stage for the JMC.

[1](#)6. (C) The GOK has cooperated actively against terrorist financing. Although there have been no direct hits, some asset freezes have hit uncomfortably close to home. Foreign branches of two Islamic charities of international scope based here have been subject to freeze orders. We have an interest in strengthening the GOK's -- and the major

charities' -- capacity to exert strict control over funds, to ensure they are not diverted to terrorist or other criminal ends. So far the GOK has been good on this issue, despite occasional sharp criticism from Islamists, but progress has not been rapid.

(U) REFORM

17. (C) It is reasonable to assume (a) that Shaykh Sabah will try to gauge how hard we intend to push his Government to enact political, educational and economic reforms, and (b) that he will argue that we not push destabilizingly hard. After all, Kuwait is a prosperous country with a basically contented citizenry; it ranked first in the UNDP's Arab Human Development Report. In Washington, Shaykh Sabah may decide to take the initiative and present himself as a reformer. This would be out of keeping with his longstanding personality, but then, he has never before wielded so much authority. So far it looks like he is treating (or at least portraying) his elevation to Prime Minister -- which pundits had openly called for, due to the Crown Prince's incapacity -- as a mandate from the Amir to enact long-overdue economic reforms. Indeed, with Shaykh Sabah's blessing, Minister of Foreign Affairs Shaykh Dr. Mohammed Sabah al-Salem al-Sabah has organized a high-level interagency working group for economic reform predicated on a heavy Kuwaiti participation in Iraqi reconstruction (ref B).

18. (C) Shaykh Sabah announced before the July National Assembly elections that he would work with the new Assembly to extend political rights to women. If he does present himself as a reformer, the Prime Minister may emphasize that overt US advocacy in this area would be counter-productive. There is more than a grain of truth to this: last December, the then-Minister of Education tried to reform the school curricula and met a torrent of resistance from Islamists in parliament who sought to discredit his initiative as a US imposition (even though we had no direct involvement).

19. (C) COMMERCIAL ISSUES: As noted ref A, we have won several contracts for American companies recently, and US firms are well positioned to be big players in the development of Kuwait's northern oil fields, though the terms offered thus far need improvement. Fulfillment of the Amir's 1996 commitment on the long-delayed Al-Zour North power project remains elusive as it finally appears poised to move to tendering. Secretary of Commerce Evans recently wrote the Prime Minister asking for reaffirmation of this commitment.

110. (C) POTENTIAL IRRITANTS: Now that the unifying threat of Saddam is gone, Kuwaitis are turning to domestic issues and losing some of their sense of needing to accommodate the United States as the ultimate guarantor of their country's security. This frees them to notice and speak up about perceived slights or irritants in the relationship, and there are some:

- Guantanamo: The detention of twelve Kuwaitis at Guantanamo is an issue that periodically nags at the relationship (inevitably, as time passes with no indication of movement towards disposing of their cases one way or another). We should expect that Shaykh Sabah will make passing reference to it. Recently, after several Islamists picked up the issue again, the President of the National Assembly dutifully made a strong public statement against their continued detention without due process, and Foreign Minister Shaykh Dr. Mohammed al-Sabah expressed the Government's agreement with his view, albeit it considerably milder terms. A proposed visit by an MOI delegation to Guantanamo could help take some steam out of the issue, particularly if it were seen as a result of Shaykh Sabah's visit.

- Mogas: The GOK's belief that KBR (on behalf of the CPA, and under the direction of the US Army Corps of Engineers) is increasingly buying mogas from Turkey instead of Kuwait (ref C), feeds the Kuwaitis' sense of being ill-rewarded for being a steadfast ally. A promise to continue buying fuel (including LPG) from Kuwait as long as foreign purchases by ACE/KBR are necessary would help salve their wounds.

- Missing Persons: Significant progress is being made in the search for the remains of Kuwaitis missing since the Iraqi occupation, and there is strong cooperation between the GOK and the Coalition. Even so, the issue of the missing is a deeply emotional one here, and some Kuwaitis feel that we did not do enough to find their kin immediately following liberation.

- UN Compensation Commission: The GOK understands that we played a constructive role in safeguarding in UNSCR 1483 the principle of Iraq's obligation to pay compensation, but it felt let down when we departed from agreed language and substituted new text at the last minute that, it fears, could make it easier to eliminate compensation in the future. Given the huge volume of outstanding claims, including from private citizens and companies, this has the

potential to become a huge negative. Assurances that it will not would be music to Shaykh Sabah's ears.

- TIP: The Secretary got the GOK's attention when he raised Trafficking In Persons with then-Minister of State for Foreign Affairs (now Foreign Minister) Shaykh Dr. Mohammed Sabah in April. Kuwait was ranked in Tier 2 this year, but will need sustained progress to stay off Tier 3 next year. The GOK's acute sensitivity to its international reputation will motivate it to address concerns that it considers valid, but prevailing attitudes towards foreign laborers -- especially domestic servants -- make for some big blind spots; as a result, Kuwaitis are not always prepared to acknowledge that they have a problem. Shaykh Sabah should hear directly how important an issue this is for the US. The best step would be to extend the Labor Law to cover domestics.

- Visas: This is actually two issues; both have been manageable thus far:

-- Getting a US visa has become a much less pleasant experience for Kuwaitis than it used to be, alienating some who would otherwise choose to travel to the US for study, business or tourism.

-- Since the start of OIF, a flood of Americans -- and others traveling under our auspices, including Iraqis -- into and out of Kuwait, all too often without proper documentation, or without proper entry/exit formalities. The GOK has been very flexible, but has nonetheless suffered snide criticism in the US media for attempting to reassert sovereign control over its borders -- something we continually ask it to ensure, for our own safety.

- Terrorist Financing: The GOK has cooperated fully in asset-freezes including some involving foreign branches of Kuwait-based Islamic charities that are considered reputable here, without seeing evidence that it would consider compelling. It has also taken steps to get better control of local fundraising activities. This has exposed the Government to complaints that it is blindly abetting Western hostility towards Islam.

- IPR: This is our nickel. Shaykh Sabah should be politely warned that barring significant progress in enforcing intellectual property rights, Kuwait is headed for elevation to the Special 301 Priority Watch List. The copyright law needs revision and more needs to be done to run street vendors of pirated electronic media out of business. Penalties for piracy must be strengthened dramatically and enforcement needs to move from the Ministry of Information to the Ministry of Interior.

JONES